What is Tisha B’Av?

Rav Soloveitchik famously draws a parallel between the three periods of mourning for close relatives and the three periods we find within the Three Weeks.

From the 17 of Tammuz, we refrain from haircuts, music and other joyous and festive activities, as one does during the 12 months of mourning for a parent. From Rosh Chodesh Av, more restrictions apply, relating to laundry, bathing, consuming meat and wine and some other joyful activities, in line with the period of shloshim.

Finally, Tisha B’Av itself is like the shiva – we sit on the floor, without greeting each other, we do not wear leather shoes and, of course we fast.

However, Rav Soloveitchik points out the obvious difference between the Three Weeks and the periods of mourning – they are in reverse!

Whereas mourning over the passing of someone close – known as Aveilut Chadasha (new mourning) – occurs in order of most to least severe, the mourning of the Three weeks – Aveilut Yeshana (mourning of the ancient) – is practised from the least to the most restrictive, culminating with the height of our mourning, Tisha B’Av itself. By Aveilut Chadasha, grief is most intense with the passing, as the image of who we have lost is still in the front of our minds, and somewhat eases over time.

When it comes to Aveilut Yeshana, we need to prepare ourselves and gradually work up to the powerful emotions that accompany a true internalisation of the meaning of Tisha B’Av. It is impossible to turn it on immediately, in one instant.

That said, what are we working towards during the Three Weeks?

It is curious that when Rav Shim-shon Refael Hirsch, in Chorev, describes the gradual destruction of Yerushalayim and the Beit HaMikdash, he writes that the 10th of Tevet was the beginning of the destruction, the 17th of Tammuz the fall of Yerushalayim and Tisha B’Av the fall of Tziyon (Zion).

What does Rav Hirsch mean by “the fall of Tziyon” and why does he use that description for Tisha B’Av instead of “the fall of the Beit HaMikdash”?

The Kinot on Tisha B’Av conclude with a number of ‘Tziyon Kinot’ – kinot that begin with the word Tziyon and, as Rav Soloveitchik describes, serve to shift our focus from remembering the destruction and ruins of Yerushalayim to remembering the glory of Yerushalayim before the destruction.

In a very real way, Tziyon is the beauty of what we once had. The embodiment of Am Yisrael as a shining beacon of Torah, justice and truth radiating from the centre of our existence, Yerushalayim.

Ultimately, Tisha B’Av must arouse in us a desire to do better.

It must motivate us to overcome and rectify the causes of destruction. But in addition to stirring in us the emotions of Zecher LeChurban – remembering the destruction, we must also achieve a state of Zecher LeMikdash – remembering the beauty of the Beit HaMikdash.

Only when we truly appreciate and internalise the magnificence of what Tziyon was, can we genuinely mourn its loss and seek to rebuild.

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